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The Secret of Fireflies

by Pamela Rodgers

The kingdom, the prince, his bride, they would all soon vanish now that the fresh bug remains on the windshield had been noticed by Stella's mother. "Get out there, Carl." Stella's mother pointed at the prince and his kingdom. "Wipe that off." Stella's stepfather, Daddy Carl, tried the clogged windshield sprayers one last time, but nothing. He then let out an exhaustive sigh and left the '62 Impala idling while he pulled what had come to be called the bug rag out of the Chevy's trunk. With one swipe of hand, he wiped the bug kingdom off the windshield with the ammonia soaked towel remnant. The delicate winged prince and his bride both dissolved and vanished as quickly as the imaginary kingdom Stella had created.

In front of the family's vehicle, a Cadillac convertible with the top down moved up a car's length in line. Daddy Carl threw the bug rag back into the green Chevy's trunk and got behind the wheel. Just as the Impala's engine fluttered, Daddy Carl hit the gas and knocked the column gear shift out of neutral with one practiced push from the palm of his right hand. The car lurched forward unevenly, rocking both Stella and her Aunt Lula in the back seat. Stella's mother braced her hands against the front dashboard. "You have to drive that way?"

Daddy Carl, unmoved by his wife's comment, stopped the car just inches from the convertible's back bumper, then leaned over and whispered something hurriedly into her ear, something that made them both smile. Ahead of them in the convertible, a young couple seemed locked to one another in a wrestler's grip. Even when the Cadillac had rolled forward, their lips had barely parted. From the Impala's back seat, Aunt Lula let out a rattling curl of laughter, "Oh my stars!" she grveled, and began a long chain of dry coughs. Stella pulled herself up so she could see over the top of the bench style front seat. Her stepfather spelled something out so that only her mother and her aunt

could know what he was saying: h-o-r-n-y. Her mother's mouth parted, showing teeth that seemed oddly white between her bold red lips. Her mother's eyes were exactly like her own, a marbled blend of green-blue, except her mother's included a tiny brown speck of color next to the left pupil. Stella had been told this was a birthmark, a tiny pebble in the pool of family traits. "It's nothing, Stella. Sit back now." Her mother's voice was curt like it was when Stella had done something wrong. But what had she done this time? She repositioned herself all the way back against the car's seat. In this position, her sweaty legs dangled, not quite touching the floorboard. Although almost seven, she was short for her age, a problem that seemed to frustrate only her mother. Stella recalled hearing the exercise man on TV say that stretching was good for you no matter what size or how old you were. And as Stella thought of this, she happened to press the bottom of her flip flop sandals into the back of her stepfather's seat. At that moment, a yelp came from the seat in front of her.

"My back!"

She'd forgotten her stepfather's back problems, his slipped disk. Stella immediately dropped her feet, but it was too late, Daddy Carl had already turned his head, wincing, his dark brown hair receding at the temples, his thin face camouflaged beneath a pair of black rimmed safety glasses, the untrimmed, shaggy brows and the pale brown eyes that seldom laughed. "Dammit," he winced, holding his lower back with one hand.

Unconsciously, Stella heaved a large amount of air out of her lungs and brushed a pile of honey curls from her face.

"Now, that's not what you say. You could cause your dad not to walk again, you hear me, now what do you say?"

"Scuse me?" Stella's voice was frayed with regret. Her green-blue eyes released tears that made



their way down her cheeks. Her world silently became a small dent in the vinyl on the back of Daddy Carl's seat, a dent in which everything lived. She did not keep track of how long she had focused on this new version of the world before being interrupted by her stepfather retrieving a length of blue tickets from the red-splotched teen at the ticket booth window. The Chevy rolled forward once more and the occupants found themselves inside the nearly empty gravel parking area full of lines of four foot tall silver speaker poles. So far, only a few were being used. Each of the parked car's windows were rolled down. A single grey umbilical cord-wire reached from the pole to the driver's window.

"Is this OK?" Stella's stepfather moved the car ahead in idle. A machinist by trade, he usually smelled like oil and cleaning fluids, and no matter how much he washed, even though he used the strongest pumice cleaning soaps, he could never completely clean the slightest hint of indelible grease from the smallest fissures in his hands. He was also wearing his safety glasses, usually reserved exclusively for work, but donned this evening due to having accidentally dropped and stepped on his regular pair of spectacles. The safety glasses had side lenses and Stella remembered the first time she'd seen them and asked what those were for. "Can you really see out of the sides of your eyes with those?" Her stepfather turned his head now, although not intentionally, so that Stella could see through the strange side lenses. Her real father was named Russ and he lived across the river

in Indiana on the edge of a small town called Darmstadt. She didn't see him very often, so she really wasn't sure exactly what he did for a living and her mother had never really told her. On the rare occasions when Stella had hugged him, she'd noticed that he always smelled like Aunt Lula's medicine.

Aunt Lula, who sat next to Stella in the car, piped up in her raspy frog's voice, "That will be just fine Carl." Stella's mother agreed. Then for several moments, the occupants of the car were jerked and jolted, as the vehicle teetered back and forth on the mound of dirt designed to raise the front of the car up so that those in the back seat could also have a good view. Finally, Aunt Lula declared that she could see the screen and the car engine stopped.

Stella stuck her face out the window of the car and took a deep breath. In the early season, the air was perfumed with the scent of the honeysuckle that grew in wide heaps along the entire length of fence that surrounded the parking area of the drive-in. This fence kept the suburb people, who hadn't paid to watch the movies, out, and the people in the cars, who'd all paid a dollar fifty per head, in.

Like always, the Starlight Theatre was scented with the world's greatest, freshly made popcorn and melt-in-your-mouth barbecue sandwiches. Her stepfather adjusted his window so that he could hang the metal speaker box by its hook atop the glass edge of the car's window.

Soon the evening light would dim and the luminous floating fireflies would lift and dip their way among the rows of cars. Stella's real dad had told her once that the fireflies only lasted just a little while and then they had to leave, but she didn't believe him. Nothing he ever said seemed to be true.

The late season of the drive-in meant the end of summer. School meant a box of new crayons and standing in front of the class to give up stories of personal adventures in show and tells. But she put those thoughts out of her mind. Early in her



Photo by Joel Kendall



family's visits to the drive-in, Stella had found the playground up next to the big screen. She would go there and ride the blue springed horses and take turns with the other kids, pushing the merry-go-round.

From the back seat, Stella noticed that Daddy Carl began to thumb through the remaining bills in his wallet. "Let's see here, five, six, seven. . ." Before he made it past eight, Stella's mother broke in, "Go ahead, tell us how much money you have, Carl."

"Looks like, fourteen dollars."

"Carl, put that up, we don't care about that right now."

"Well, you should. You couldn't buy all those things you like otherwise."

Stella's mother repositioned herself in the seat of the car and she spoke in a lowered tone. "You mean like food for the table, and clothes for our backs, Carl?"

Aunt Lula's voice interrupted, "I just love those good old fashioned movies, don't you? Sometimes I get so caught up, I cry." She said this in earnest. "I just can't help myself." A pregnant silence momentarily filled the late afternoon air of the green Chevy.

"Oh, I know," Stella's mother added, her own voice now sweet, reassuring. "It's wonderful when movies make you cry."

"Yeah, *The Mummy's Curse*." Daddy Carl leaned in to replace his wallet in his back pocket. "A real tear jerker."

"Well, Carl, what about *Gone with the Wind*?" Aunt Lula replied.

"Or, *The Creature From the Black Lagoon*." His voice, a measured rhythm, distinct. It was the same voice he had used when he thought Stella had done something wrong. "Now there's good movie making."

Stella had the door to the car half open as she said, "I'm going to ride the rides."

"Don't forget your sandals," her mother yelled as Stella shut the door to the car. The walk across

the gravel was liberating. She would play as long as she wanted, make friends, have them over to tea and ride the blue horses. Dust and squeaky hinges would entertain her until dusk. But this time, she would not ride the blue springed horses. Both horses were already taken by other children. Luckily, there was still room on the kid-propelled merry-go-round, and as it stopped to let off dizzy, sideways stepping passengers, she climbed on and held tight, while the big kids pushed everyone else. The world, everything turned round and round. She watched the sunlight of day as it slipped behind the honeysuckle covered fence. Stella turned and turned, lost within the fusion of night and day.

Soon an arrangement of car horns broke the silence. It was almost dark, almost time. With every second that passed the light seemed to fade. Near the entrance booth, cars were still rolling in. Somewhere in the slow-moving traffic could be heard the roar of teenage engines, the sound of a bottle crashing and isolated laughter. A few of the parked car owners switched on their lights and honked their horns to illustrate that it was time.

Stella caught a glimpse of the big screen as she rotated. It was an enormous collection of white painted plywood, each of identical size. Her stepfather had used plywood to work on the walls of their house. The big screen she guessed was about the same size as the brontosaurus she'd seen munching on trees in picture books. The creatures were always compared in scale with the tiny outline of a man. As she turned around and around, she caught a glimpse of the big screen as it began to change colors. Immense silent images seemed to move at random. Near the back of the fence that surrounded the drive-in, she could see the first gliding dances of lightening bugs and when the merry-go-round stopped for a passenger change, Stella leapt off to find her parents' car, pretending she was Robin running alongside Batman with his huge billowing cape rustling like the flopping cuffs of the shorts she wore. Finally, she reached the boxy green Chevy that Stella climbed into next.





Photo by Joel Kendall

"Anyway, you can imagine that all the time. . . ." Stella's mother finished up as Stella crawled into the car.

"Did I ever tell you how I saw the original showing of *Gone with the Wind*?" Lula obviously was changing the subject.

In the remaining light, Stella stared at her aunt's brown and mossy green eyes. Her aunt's face was a mixture of mouth and eye wrinkles combined with the irregular speckling of age spots on both her forehead and cheeks. Stella's mother had performed curler rites that afternoon on Aunt Lula's grey brown locks and what was normally a shaggy, neck-length cut had now become a hairsprayed mass of blossom-like curls.

Through the car's window, beyond her aunt's

hair, fireflies floated up then down in graceful slow motion. Her aunt turned to follow Stella's gaze, then took a small flask of her special medicine from her purse and leaned back to take a swallow. "Aren't they pretty?" her aunt's voice graveled.

"Where do they come from?" Stella asked.

"Out in the weeds," her stepfather mentioned from the front seat. He'd used his louder voice, to make sure he was heard above the sound of movie previews coming from the speaker next to him.

Lula raised her voice as well. "They only live for one night, did you know that, Carl?"

"That so?" Stella's stepfather answered above the sound of torpedoes exploding a battleship.

Aunt Lula pointed to two points of light that were blinking alternately. "See those two flying

together?" After they have..., and conscious of Stella's presence, Lula continued, "Well, after they mate, their lights fall off, and that's where their larva come from."

"Is that your bottle talking, Lula?" Daddy Carl's voice interrupted.

Stella scrunched her nose into a look of questioning disgust, "What's *larva* mean?"

"It's their secret, dear." Aunt Lula smiled and took another long sip from her flask.

"Stella, honey, now sit up and listen, the cartoon's coming on." Her mother's voice urged.

Stella hooked her arms over the front seat, resting her chin on the top edge of the stiff vinyl. She wondered what her parents had been discussing while she was at the playground.

Just past the rearview mirror, Woody Woodpecker crackled laughter through the air as Stella's father lowered the speaker volume. In the darkness of the back seat she wiggled her toes and felt the dust from the playground. It was a sensation that she didn't like and she tossed the rubber flip-flops off, losing them in the darkness of the floor-board.

A shadowy figure traversed close in front of the car and momentarily blocked part of the screen from view. It was a man with shoulder-length hair and a headband carrying an open box of Cokes and tubs of popcorn. Her stepfather honked the green Chevy's horn at the man, who made a "V" with his first two fingers, then continued walking. "Well the crazy son of a bitch!" her stepfather murmured.

"Carl!" Stella's mother countered.

"Well look how close he was to our car Edith."

"No manners." Aunt Lula grumbled. "Some people have no manners at all."

"These kids today, they think they got the world coming to 'em," her stepfather added.

Woody Woodpecker stuck his red tussled crest and smiling beak through the hole he'd just made in a piece of wood and performed his repetitive laugh. As the cartoon faded, a crackle and slither-

ing hiss was heard. The screen was lit, but blank, except for a few giant pieces of hairy-looking lint that were moving around in the top left of the screen. Car horns began honking randomly. Stella's mother and stepfather both exhaled as if they were trying to blow all of the air out of their lungs at once. As if to answer this non-verbal request, a bass fiddle melodically thumped as a still picture of sandwiches and crushed ice drinks appeared on the screen. The bass was joined by a hissing cymbal and a playful, rhythmic piano. "It's time to enjoy our taste-treat sensations." The still picture faded to a cartoon of sandwiches and drinks and candy bars holding hands. They danced, kicking legs to the music as they all revolved in a neat circle on the big screen. The music continued, but a photograph of a real sandwich replaced the dancing group. "Try our world famous, melt-in-your-mouth barbecue sandwiches." Next a crushed ice drink with a serving of onion rings appeared. "Or one of our delicious, refreshing ice cold Coca Colas, or what about those mouthwatering onion rings!" Stella wanted to try them all. Before the end of the intermission, Daddy Carl turned his head so that Stella could see the squared off silhouette of his eyeglasses. "Edith, you want something?"

"Oh, now you're going to spend some money?" Stella's mother queried.

"Come on, what do you want?"

Stella's mother turned away, staring off out the passenger side window.

"Lula?" Daddy Carl questioned.

"I'll take a popcorn and a small Tab."

"I want a barbecue sandwich," Stella said.

Stella's mother came out of her gaze, "Get just one barbecue sandwich for me and Stella to share and some Cokes."

"You want to go?" Daddy Carl offered to Stella in his most charming voice. Stella searched in the darkness below her feet to retrieve the dusty flip-flops she'd abandoned just minutes earlier.

Holding her hand with two of his fingers, Daddy Carl towered over her as they crunched



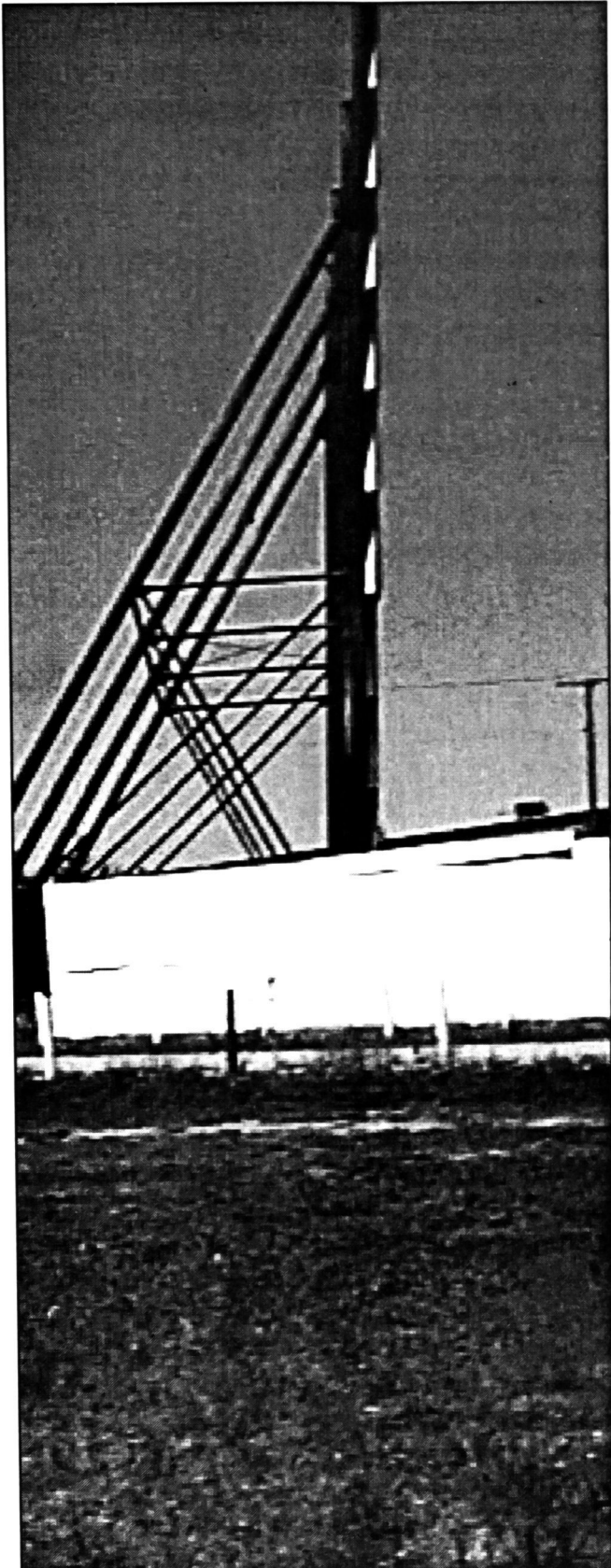


Photo by Joel Kendall

gravel on their way to the single small building on the theatre property. The refreshment building was a concrete structure painted white. It was lit with harsh yellow lights that made a constant, frantic, electric hum. Inside, was the sound of onion rings becoming crisp in hot oil and a surprise when the pizza oven timer went “ding.” A flowing mound of freshly made popcorn flavored the air.

A middle-aged man with a pink nose and face stood behind the counter. “Give me a box of those” her stepfather insisted. The man used his large, sun-dried hands to grab a giant box of chocolate covered raisins—her father’s favorite.

“Daddy,” Stella pointed at the world’s largest box of Hot Tamale candies, “can I get some of those too?”

“Those things?” There was a smile in her stepfather’s voice. “They’re too hot aren’t they?”

She gave him her most sincere and solemn oath that she really would eat those things, even if they did burn her mouth off.

Her stepfather led her back to the car and Stella wiggled into the vinyl seat. The smells of melted butter and warm barbecue intermingled in the air.

Stella was handed a half of a sandwich wrapped in shiny foil-like paper and told to, “Be careful.”

Daddy Carl reached up to the ceiling of the car and turned on the overhead light. He had his check book out, examining it, an obvious squint on his face.

“What are you doing?” Stella’s mother questioned in an irritated tone as she held half of the sandwich up to her mouth.

“I wrote a check earlier today and I didn’t write it down in my book.”

Stella’s mother reached to turn off the light on the ceiling of the car, and as she did, Daddy Carl grabbed her extended arm. They stared at each other in silence until Daddy Carl eventually gave in, first pushing his wife’s hand away, then reaching with his own hand to turn the light off.

The meat and bread of the sandwich seemed

to evaporate in Stella's mouth. She wiped her hands on her tee shirt and sipped through shaved ice to glean bubbles of sweetness. Aunt Lula munched popcorn and briefly sipped her Tab. Stella sat all the way back in her seat, then remembered the Hot Tamales.

She chewed the burning cinnamon and finished her Coke as the feature movie, *Blackbeard's Ghost*, began. By the time Blackbeard had materialized from the antique bed warmer, she could feel pressure in her bladder. "Mom, I gotta pee."

Her mother, by now a collage of shadows, got out and walked with Stella across the uneven gravel past the rear ends of Fords and Volkswagens to the backside of the yellow-lit snack shack.

Inside, it smelled of urine and cigarette butts. Stella held her breath as long as she could, then took a gulp of air through her mouth and hurried.

Once outside again, the air was much fresher than she had remembered. The stars, each magic speck of light, seemed to welcome her return to the world.

Back inside the car, Aunt Lula lit one of her Pall Mall Kings and the tip flashed. It settled to a steady ember. In the darkness of the car, Stella imagined that as her aunt moved the ember back out the window to flick, the discarded ember turned into a firefly and took flight across the sky. She wondered what her aunt had meant about the two fireflies they'd seen flying together. What could their secret possibly be?

Once, she remembered, she'd caught several of the slender bodied lightening bugs and sealed them inside a quart mason jar. She'd carefully punched holes in the top of the jar and had watched the bugs as they walked around, blinking. The next morning she had expected to find them, still blinking as brilliantly as ever, but instead, they'd been

lifeless. Each was on its back, its legs crooked in the air. Not a single one had survived.

Stella's eyelids became heavy and she propped her feet onto her aunt's lap and leaned back into a reclining position. Her aunt's head was tilted, leaning against the car door. Stella could see the straight outline of her aunt's nose and high, curved cheekbones. In the front seat, a shifting shadow of light and dark fell over the side of her mother's hair and face, and at the very top of Daddy Carl's head, she could see light move off the slicked back contours of his hair. Above her, she focused through the open window of the back seat. There were so many stars she couldn't count them. Bright and dim, single, like her mother's ring and clustered, like spilled baby powder. They each seemed to call to her. . .to know her. The ones that blinked especially. She wondered if the fireflies lived up there instead of in the weeds, or if the stars were really fireflies just blinking slower because they were resting. She wondered if Daddy Carl was going to go away like her real Daddy had. Stella closed her eyes and felt the warmth between the back of her head and the car's vinyl seat. It seemed only moments had passed when she heard the voice of the pirate yell out. Stella sat up just in time to catch a glimpse of the pirate stealing a football. Then she slowly sank back, eyes heavy with sleep, and rested her head on the car's seat once more. Clouds of gray filled her eyes. She floated through the darkness among thousands of stars and blinking fireflies. There were so many gliding around her as she floated among them. Their secret, she thought, must be that they live with the stars, and that's where they must go to sleep. Their silent glimmering lights floated around her, and distantly, she heard the old pirate's troubled voice, but this time, she did not need to open her eyes.

